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SUBJECT: SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE HOLBROOKE'S DECEMBER 2
MEETING WITH BELGIAN MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS STEVEN
VANACKERE

Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: On December 2, Richard Holbrooke discussed President Obama's newly announced Afghanistan strategy with Steven Vanackere, the Foreign Minister of Belgium. Holbrooke said the strategy involves and increase in troops and training for the Afghan army and police to enable foreign troops to be withdrawn as early as possible. The most controversial aspect of the strategy, he said, is the establishment of a 2011 date for beginning to withdraw troops. Vanackere urged the USG to make known at least a general idea of the time frame of the troops' engagement, saying that this is important to the Belgian government's ability to maintain support for its commitment to ISAF. Holbrooke responded that the length of the commitment to Afghanistan depends on training and the progress of the Afghan army and police toward being able to provide security. Setting a firm date now for a total withdrawal would be unwise, he said. Holbrooke stressed that development assistance, particularly to rebuild Afghanistan's agricultural sector, is important to both stability and the allies' ability to withdraw troops as early as possible. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Richard Holbrooke, the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, met on December 2 with the newly-appointed Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Steven Vanackere. The meeting took place the day after President Obama's announcement of a new strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Holbrooke told Vanackere that the President's new initiative has two important elements, the first of which is a major increase in the U.S. troop commitment to Afghanistan, by 30,000 troops, costing more than USD 30 billion a year. The second is an emphasis on training the Afghan army and police to take over the job of providing security for Afghanistan and allow U.S. and ISAF troops to return home. Holbrooke said that the Afghan police suffer from difficulties in recruiting, high attrition and illiteracy. Training troops is dangerous work, he added, but training the police and army is the test.

¶3. (C) Holbrooke said that the President's decision to set a date for beginning a withdrawal of American troops is the most controversial aspect of his strategy. However, the President did not set an end date nor did he specify at what rate troops would be withdrawn. It is important for Belgium to be more than a verbal ally, he stressed, and urged that the GOB give consideration to offering an increase in its troop commitment at the December 7 NATO force generation conference. He acknowledged that Belgian politics are complicated, but as a country at the center of Europe, its actions are important, he said. Holbrooke hoped that the GOB could give Secretary Clinton a general idea of what it can offer when she comes to Brussels on December 4 for the NATO ministerial. A number of other European countries have already said that they are willing to provide new troops to the mission, he said. He said that the USG is not interested in dictating to what areas of Afghanistan Belgian troops should be assigned, and acknowledged that service in any area is dangerous.

¶4. (C) Vanackere noted the President's intention to begin troop withdrawals in 2011, but was most interested in when national defense would be handed to the Afghans entirely. He recognized that it is difficult to set a hard and fast schedule, and that much depends on the situation on the ground. However, he said, the GOB would like to have some clarity about how long the foreign commitment to Afghanistan is likely to last. The Belgian government is a coalition and many of the coalition's members will be asking whether Belgian troops will have to stay a long time or a short time. Vanackere said that he understands the difficulties of announcing a specific timetable, but the idea of a long-lasting engagement will not be easy for the GOB to manage. He said Belgium places importance on being considered a solid ally and wants to keep that reputation. Still, he concluded, a short time horizon is better.

¶5. (C) Holbrooke said that clarity about the length of the engagement in Afghanistan will come in due time. Secretary Clinton is consulting with the U.S. Congress, and he himself is starting a round of consultations in Europe at the Belgian

foreign ministry. The Ambassador told Vanackere that he had hosted five prominent Belgian journalists at 2 am at his home to hear the President's speech at West Point. After the speech, he said, and like Ambassador Holbrooke, he made no specific request but placed trust in Belgium that it will take appropriate action. Holbrooke repeated that the troop

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buildup will continue through 2011 and then will tail off at a rate to be determined by conditions on the ground. Progress in training the army and police, and the success of assistance programs to improve the economy will affect the rate of withdrawal. Setting a hard deadline was a mistake made in Bosnia in the 1990's that should not be repeated in Afghanistan, Holbrooke said. In Afghanistan, he said, the Americans and Europeans have watches but the Afghans have the time. If a firm date for withdrawal is established, the Taliban will simply withdraw and wait it out, then return. Holbrooke warned that Brussels, like other cities in the United States and Europe, is a target of terrorists now training and planning in Afghan-Pakistan border areas. The issue of when to remove troops is as tensely debated in the United States as in Europe, he observed, but help is needed from America's allies.

¶6. (C) Vanackere responded, saying that Belgium's Prime Minister, Defense Minister and Foreign Minister are meeting to consider what additional Belgium can offer. Belgium certainly is ready and willing to offer moral support, he said. However, the Afghan government has to take responsibility for its own defense as soon as possible. The GOB recognizes that a three-sided strategy of military action, police training and economic support is required. The fact that the United States up to now is making no clear-cut demands makes it easier for the Belgian government to come forward. Police training is a possibility the GOB is examining, he said. Holbrooke outlined upgrades now being instituted in the way police are being trained by foreign advisors. Holbrooke asked what statements by the USG would be helpful to Belgium as it develops its response to the Afghan strategy. Vanackere said that Belgium wants to leave Afghanistan when the Afghans are ready and able to provide their own security. It would be good to say that it is our ambition to accomplish that within a certain reasonable time frame. Other than that, he said, Holbrooke's and the Obama administration's willinrgatey without making co helpful to the GOB.

ially importantes wants to work closely rt ch as grapes, rter De Cree press that while no specific request had as yet been made, when it comes it might be to stay beyond 2010 or to send additional civilian aid. In an interview televised by Belgium's French-language state broadcaster, SR Holbrooke also said that no request for a specific number of troops has been made. Belgium and other European allies are sovereign and must make their own decisions, he said, but the situation in Afghanistan is serious and additional Allied help is needed and appreciated. He emphasized the danger a resurgent Taliban and Al Qaida pose not only to America but also to Europe.

¶10. (C) Embassy Comment: Although Vanackere, De Crem and the Belgian press seemed somewhat relieved that no formal request for troops or other assistance to Afghanistan has been made, they all understand that more is expected of Belgium and Europe. In Belgium's case, its military resources are stretched very nearly to the limits. Its leadership is thinking in terms of extending the military commitment beyond 2010, sending a handful of police trainers and increasing development aid, most likely through third-party institutions. Other than the six F-16's and their crews now in Kandahar, deployment of troops in the south of Afghanistan

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will meet strong resistance in Parliament, and would require backtracking on promises previously made by Minister De Crem. Strong public and parliamentary support for an extended and/or additional military commitment, as well as for a robust but expensive civilian effort, will require a more deeply internalized understanding of the real threat to Belgian security posed by an Al Qaida that has a secure base in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. End Embassy comment.

GUTMAN

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